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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 WARSAW 001489

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/2021
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KNAR](#) [PL](#)
SUBJECT: ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE POLISH GOVERNMENT

REF: WARSAW 992

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor David Van Cleve for
reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) is stung by criticism that it is anti-Semitic, gutting Holocaust education, and too slow to act on long delayed private property restitution, but does not have a strategy to deal with these problems. PiS points to its heretofore good track record on a range of issues important to the international and local Jewish communities, and the GOP's generally excellent relations with Israel. However, it has done little to nothing to rein in the extremist views expressed by some members of the League of Polish Families (LPR), its junior coalition partner, whose leader, Roman Giertych, is a lightning rod for criticism. Giertych is dogged by the public perception that even if he is not anti-Semitic himself, his party includes leaders who promote anti-Semitic and homophobic views in the name of protecting the Polish nation. As long as LPR remains in government and Giertych fails to distance himself from extremists within his party, the coalition government will continue to face charges that it turns a blind eye to hateful views. End Summary.

Sensitivity to Negative Press

12. (C) Highly sensitive to criticism, notably from the foreign press, PiS officials chafe against the perception that their party is anti-Semitic. Officials at every level of government have taken umbrage to negative international press about Poland and anti-Semitism, notably in the New York Times and relating to the publication of Jan Gross's new book on the Kielce pogrom in 1946. A number of these articles have drawn misleading comparisons between Poland today and the bleak situation facing Holocaust survivors in Poland

sixty years ago, immediately following World War II.

PiS Viewed Positively by Jewish Leaders

¶3. (U) The issue of anti-Semitism surfaced anew in Poland at the same time as the public attack on Rabbi Michael Schudrich, an American citizen who is the Rabbi of Warsaw and Lodz. As reported reftel, Schudrich was punched and pepper-sprayed in late May, 2006, by a skinhead who shouted "Poland for Poles," a well-known anti-Semitic epithet from the inter-war period. In response to the attack, then PM Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz called Rabbi Schudrich within hours. President Lech Kaczynski met with Schudrich personally within three days, and police in late June arrested his alleged attacker, who faces criminal charges. PiS officials -- and the politically astute Rabbi -- are quick to point to these efforts, and statements decrying the assault, as strong evidence that Poland is not, as some charge, a hot bed of anti-Semitism. Schudrich himself pointed this out in a letter to the editor of the New York Times.

¶4. (U) Indeed, local Jewish leaders commend the Kaczynski for their history of support. When he was mayor of Warsaw, President Lech Kaczynski was widely credited with breathing new life into the proposed Museum of the History of Jews in Poland by ramming through the city bureaucracy a plan to donate the necessary land for the museum's construction. That museum is scheduled to break ground this year and open in 2009. Kaczynski equally secured a favorable lease for the museum staff's offices in the center of the capitol. As the chairman of the Sejm's Treasury Committee, former PM Marcinkiewicz was also instrumental in drafting legislation to provide for private property restitution. Although that effort has yet to pass, Marcinkiewicz won high marks from local and foreign Jewish leaders for his expertise and efforts. Jewish leaders were effusive when PiS unexpectedly won both parliamentary and presidential elections last fall because of PiS's proven, positive track record on Polish-Jewish relations. In addition to these efforts, the government continues to maintain close ties with Israel, making Poland one of Tel Aviv's steadiest allies in Europe.

So What Went Wrong?

¶5. (C) Despite the good track record, Jewish and Israeli audiences have been aghast at the elevation of two Polish fringe political parties, Self Defense (SO) and the League of Polish Families (LPR) to the government coalition. Allied with SO and LPR, PiS at last has achieved a parliamentary majority that permits it to accelerate its efforts on a wide range of domestic political projects, notably focused on corruption and rooting out vestiges of Communist-era influence. PiS's singular focus on vanquishing the remaining elements of a shadowy network of businesses, government and military officials, led to a marriage of convenience that is unpalatable to a majority of Poles (who by a wide margin dislike SO and LPR) and the international Jewish community.

Restitution Plan Held Hostage to Political Divisions

¶6. (C) Restitution is an example of politics holding sensible ideas hostage. While most centrist parties agree with PiS that Poland should do something to address private property restitution, neither SO nor LPR support the effort. The government has proposed legislation, identical to the bill proposed by the former SLD government, awaiting action in the Sejm, and sent two senior GOP officials to Washington and New York to discuss the plan with USG and Jewish leaders in April, before the coalition deal with SO and LPR was struck. However, with PiS's focus elsewhere, it seems unlikely that the government will move forward on restitution legislation, which would require twisting the arms of its reluctant junior partners, and then possibly crafting a compromise with the opposition -- not a likely proposition in the negative political environment here.

¶7. (C) SO gets its share of criticism owing to the honorary degree awarded to its leader, Andrej Lepper, from the virulently anti-Semitic Academy of Personnel Management (MAUP) in Ukraine. When asked why he failed to distance himself from that institution, Lepper brazenly challenged one journalist to "go ahead, and write that I'm an anti-Semite." The majority of criticism, however, has been leveled understandably against Roman Giertych and LPR.

LPR and the Political Legacy of Anti-Semitism

¶8. (C) Giertych, in some measure, suffers from a family history that is without question anti-Semitic. His grandfather, Jędrzej, was a leader of Poland's National Democratic Party (Endecja), which promoted nationalist, anti-Semitic policies in the inter-war period. The youth arm of that party, Młodzież Wszechpolska (All-Poland Youth) supported an economic boycott against Jews and policies restricting Jews access to higher education. Giertych's father, Maciej, LPR's Presidential candidate last year and a member of the European Parliament, is equally viewed as an anti-Semite stemming in part from statements like those he made urging authorities to avoid "press outlets controlled by the Jews" in restoring order during Martial Law. Maciej Giertych caused a flap in the European Parliament earlier this month when he praised fascist dictator Francisco Franco as a man who maintained order and supported a strongly Catholic vision of society.

¶9. (C) While not wanting to visit the sins of the father(s) on the (grand)son, Giertych has been quick to use his family's affiliation when it will benefit him politically. For instance, Giertych's rise to political fame came through a revitalized All-Poland Youth, which he helped form in 1989, notably bearing the same name as its anti-Semitic, inter-war predecessor. And while he has studiously avoided making anti-Semitic remarks, he was criticized widely after Rabbi Schudrich's assault for failing to address the issue squarely. Giertych's comments, that "LPR is not anti-Semitic" and "hooliganism can happen anywhere," struck many as faint, notably compared to the unequivocal statements by PiS officials. Moreover, he has done nothing to stop other LPR members from making outrageous statements, such as his deputy, Wojciech Wierzejski, who urged violence against gay rights advocates in Warsaw's recent Equality Parade. "Perverts," Wierzejski opined, "should be beaten with bats." Giertych steadfastly has supported the appointment of Piotr Farfal, a 28-year old lawyer with ties to All-Poland Youth, to a senior position at Polish National Television, despite revelations in the press that Farfal published a neo-Nazi paper for several years as a teenager, which included shocking characterizations of Jews. Farfal remains in his job.

Ministry of Education

¶10. (C) The GOP's frustration with the anti-Semitic label is exacerbated by Giertych's plans to promote "patriotic education" in his capacity as Minister of Education. As part of that effort, funding to several NGOs for Holocaust-education programming has been cut off as "inconsistent with the Minister's plan for patriotic education." Giertych himself told the Ambassador in their meeting on May 23 that "Holocaust education programming would be an integral part of patriotic education," but working level contacts at the Ministry of Education confirmed on July 17 that funding for teacher training (which includes many Holocaust education programs) had "decreased seriously."

¶11. (C) Polish media widely reported on the Israeli Embassy's boycott of Giertych and his LPR deputies, and Israeli Ambassador David Peleg has repeatedly told the Ambassador that his government will have nothing to do with LPR. In contrast to U.S. diplomatic efforts, Peleg has lobbied publicly for moving Holocaust education programming out of

the Ministry of Education altogether, which would salvage programs that bring thousands of Israeli teenagers annually to Poland to visits sites related to Jewish life as well as Nazi concentration camps. The President's Chancellery asserts it was working on a plan to remove Holocaust education from the Ministry of Education when Peleg's public remarks forced it to put the plan on hold. Giertych and Peleg were both present at the commemoration last week of the massacre in Jedwabne, a Polish town where local residents in 1941 herded their Jewish neighbors into a barn and burned them alive. As part of his public boycott, Peleg refused to meet with Giertych at the event.

Comment

¶12. (C) Giertych's high profile, however, has not lifted LPR's fortunes. Two polls this week show LPR capturing only one and two percent, respectively, of public support. The Kaczynskis' plan for some time has been to move PiS to the right and devour the competition, and all indications are that this plan is succeeding. But the Kaczynskis' inward focus on domestic politics comes at a real cost in terms of Poland's standing and influence abroad, notably within the EU. Furthermore, Lech Kaczynski's recent decision to skip the Weimar summit with President Chirac and Chancellor Merkel has exacerbated the Polish government's increasingly negative and parochial image. Notwithstanding his solid track record, Lech Kaczynski is concerned that Giertych is poised to hijack his legacy goal of full Jewish-Polish reconciliation. The European Parliament's condemnation of "the rise in racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic and homophobic intolerance in Poland" equally suggests that PiS will continue to suffer politically from its choice of coalition partners. Clearly the GOP must move forward on a range of issues like private property restitution, resolving property disputes, recommitting to Holocaust education, and high profile initiatives such as marshalling resources for improvements to the Treblinka death camp. If progress is not made soon on Holocaust education, the Embassy may consider ways to step up the pressure for action (septel). PiS is not an anti-Semitic party. But this aside, distrust of Roman Giertych and LPR is likely to continue to damage Poland's standing as long as he remains in the government.

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